Queer Temporalities, Queerer Bodies and Jeanette Winterson's "The Stone Gods”

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STRESZCZENIE: "Queerowe czasowości, bardziej queerowe ciała oraz powieść Jeanette Winterson 'The Stone Gods'"

Niedawny antyspołeczny zwrot w teorii *queer* zredefiniował znaczenie odmieńczości. Takie prace, jak *No Future* Lee Edelmana, postawiły pytania dotyczące roli społecznej/ ról społecznych odmieńczości, praktyk *queerowania* i *queerowych* przyszłości. Poniższy artykuł bada wkład literatury Jeanette Winterson do tej toczącej się debaty. Autorka argumentuje, że powieść Winterson "The Stone Gods" jest podjęciem wyzwania dla wyobrażenia sobie *queerowego* świata; Winterson wrzuca nas w możliwą społeczną przyszłość, gdzie tak naprawdę nie ma przyszłości.

Winterson przedstawia świat, w którym odmieńczość wyabstrahowana jest z aktów seksualnych, stosunek seksualny nie stanowi już matrycy reprodukcji biologicznej, a homonormatywność tak głęboko splotła się z konsumeryzmem, neoliberalizmem i satysfakcją seksualną, że konceptualizowanie odmieńczości jako nienormatywności zupełnie traci sens. W ten sposób - poprzez pryzmat społeczny - "The Stone Gods" zdaje się sugerować odpowiedzi na wiele obecnie stawianych teoretycznych pytań. Pozycję tę można czytać jako *queerowy* tekst, który *queeruje* samo pojęcie sfery społecznej, jednocześnie pozostając wiernym *queerowej* etyce ciągłego stawania się.

Generalnie rzecz biorąc, artykuł wychodzi z założenia, że powieść Winterson (być może niezamierzenie) udziela odpowiedzi na wiele pytań, które postawiły dyskusje wokół *queerowych* relacji społecznych i *queerowej* przyszłości, destabilizując przy tym nowo powstały paradygmat *queerowej* negatywności Lee Edelmana za pomocą przedstawionych krajobrazów społecznych. Fikcja literacka w rodzaju "The Stone Gods", jak sugeruje autorka, może zaproponować cenne odpowiedzi w reakcji na neoliberalne pozycjonowanie *queerowych* ciał i relacji; co więcej, artykuł wskazuje, że każda próba artykulacji *queerowej* pozytywności musi z założenia implikować artykulację etyki.

Introduction

Recently I was at a hip-hop night where the artists, and audience, were unusually mixed; within this melange of musical sways a young (as yet unsigned) female rapper grabbed the mike. This is nothing unusual. What stayed with me long after the night ended, however, was the content of her raps. She began by sketching out the physical environment of Cornwall; the seas, the cliffs, the vast open spaces that had framed her upbringing, then altered the mood by speaking of her own utopian vision; she spent one track asking the audience to imagine if the whole world was queer.

What struck me about this experience was the dual strategy of the rapper; she was at once positioning herself within physical and political contexts and challenging those of the audience. As an activist-tinted approach this is of course nothing new. What was interesting, however, was the way that the audience responded; conversations fizzled out, postures became less slouchy, eyes less bleary. Caught within the moment of lyrical displacement people appeared to be following the rappers command to imagine. Whilst taking this in I found myself wondering how such a world would seem within each person's imagination, and who, in the rappers' articulation and the audiences responses, would be granted entry.

The task of imagining a world where everyone is queer[1] has been taken up by Jeanette Winterson in *The Stone Gods* .[2] Aside from the texts' value as an absorbing, eloquent piece of contemporary fiction, *The Stone Gods* can be read in engagement with many current debates; indeed it seemingly draws much of its content from queer and literary theories.[3] The recent anti-social turn in queer theory has recast the meaning of queerness; works such as Edelman's *No Future* have raised questions about the social role(s) of queerness, of queering as strategy, and of queer futurities. The thorough work of theorists drawing on post-colonial theory has further underlined how homonormativities can overlap and be strengthened by affirming existing lines of inequality, functioning as "contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary" (Puar 2). This article discusses Jeanette Winterson's contribution to this debate. It argues that *The Stone Gods* answers the call to imagine a world where everyone is queer (along particular, delineated lines) and thrusts us forwards into a social futurity where there really is no future. Whilst the text responds to multiple other themes and concerns - most notably the ecological disasters lingering in current global destructive practices, the rise of surveillance culture and corporate sponsored biopolitical agendas - the textual toying with sexual identities and ethics are the main foci of this paper. As this issue of *Interalia* is devoted to exploring the anti-social thesis or turn within queer studies, I suggest that Winterson's text ultimately

answers many of the questions that it poses.[4]

This discussion begins by outlining the sociosexual landscape offered by the first section of *The Stone Gods,* and highlighting some of the queer questions that it raises. It then turns to the role of gender within the social setting and explores parallels between Winterson's imagined world and contemporary trends in the global north. The third section looks at race within Winterson's construction of citizenship and finally discuss temporalities and (no) futurities within *The Stone Gods* .

Sexual identity, queers and queer normativities

On the most foundational level, Winterson really has imagined, and kept on imagining for 246 pages, a world where heteronormativity has been replaced by corporate-sponsored sexual extremism, where anything goes and where everybody's body is rendered *a priori* queer. In part this is a continuation of Winterson's previous work, where we are shown

"a whole range of abjected, ab-normal, de-legitimised and grotesque bodies. In a way, just as Butler says, her texts can be seen precisely to test the boundaries of normalised sex, celebrating rather than policing the multifarious uses of bodies and pleasures (Morrison, Who Cares 175)."

In contrast to her earlier work, *The Stone Gods* captures a society of bodies which are so far from any 'norm' that norms themselves cease to function as normalising devices. The sexual-scaffolding of the Central Powers' landscape is guided by gratification-led physical and aesthetic desires; sexual desire has been actively elevated as a distraction from (and by) the corporate-led capitalism that now writes the social scripts. Sexual acts and enactments are depicted within a realm of amorality, experienced as purely bodily functions. Sophisticated biotechnologies have become routinely available, every body is genetically fixed (at certain ages) so human ageing has functionally disappeared and robots are an everyday part of existence. Simultaneously, biological age has become devoid of meaning, legal sex starts at fourteen "but everyone does it younger" (Winterson, The Stone Gods , 20) and the concept of paedophilia is rapidly losing a referential framework. In other words, sex and sexual bodies have been dislocated from reproductive functions and stripped of any ethical framing. Sexualities emerge within the Central Power as intensely individualised and self-serving, dictated not by relationships between participants but by potential relationalities between technology, desires and biopolitical agendas.

In terms of sexual practices, anything and everything now goes; the result (which contains a covert resonance for the antisocial turn in queer theory) is everyone in the Central Power is bored. This is most evident in Winterson's description of *The Peccadillo* ;

"it is a perverts' bar, and we're all perverts now. By that I meant that making everyone young and beautiful made us all bored to death with sex. All men are hung like wales . . . jaws are square, skin is tanned, muscles are toned, and no one gets turned on. It's a global crisis. At least, it's a crisis among the cities of the Central Power (Winterson 23)."

Every body has been fixed to look beautiful; "we look alike, except for rich people and celebrities, who look better. That's what you'd expect in a democracy" (Winterson 23). Every form of sex is practised and celebrated; paedophilia, explicit pornography and polyamory are commonplace, and physical embodiment is entwined with degrees of genetic-modification. Biotechnologies are so integrated into the accepted social landscape that the frontier between human and machine is slippery to place, and their uses are overwhelmingly sexual. The most extreme examples of this are called translucents; "see-through people. When you fuck them you can watch yourself doing it. It's pornography for introverts" (Winterson 22). Further, "sexy sex is now about freaks and children. If you want to work in the sex industry, you get yourself cosmetically altered in shape and size. Giantesses are back in business. Grotesques earn good money" (Winterson 23).

Winterson's depiction of sexual identities in *The Stone Gods* may be seen as a vocal intervention into the arena of queer identitarian politics and motion towards a more inclusive, less body-bound and genital-fixated definition of queerness. It highlights the limits of limited definitions of sexual identity and politics, and serves to question the foundation of queer as politics. Engaging with current queer discourses she shows that it is "questionable whether radical sex practices, subversive aesthetic performances, and 'alternative lifestyles' are adequate on their own for thinking about the emergence of queerness" (Jones 3). It provides a sharp reminder of just how non-political sex can be, and shows that this non-political queerness is not necessarily full of positivity, of negativity, or even of anything at all (Halberstam, The Anti-Social Turn 140).

In *The Stone Gods* conceptualisations of queerness, sexual identities and the compulsion to identify at all lose their discursive power. Like Winterson's previous endeavours, the text "insists upon a constant deferral of fixed sexual identities" (Moore 105), and moves us one step further as here the significance of sexual identities, of a straight/queer binary is banished into a desirous

soup of oblivion. Everybody's body, it seems, is orientated along non-straight lines, as physical bodies themselves are re-inscribed (cell-deep) according to their desires (and crucially, conforming to the biopolitical aesthetic-frame that structures them). Here we are presented with a nonchalantly post-homophobic socio-sexual epoch. All identity markers are so commonplace, so accessible, that queer can no longer displace, disrupt or trouble. As queer/ed bodies emerge as the social default, the essentialism of what it means to be embodied, to be desirous, to be anything in relation to anything else at all, is forced unto a precarious positioning. Emancipation from compulsory heterosexuality is far from liberating in this fictional space; in fact, it is far from anything. If Winterson's work as a whole may be read as a "serious invitation to readers to imagine the emancipation of 'normal' and 'natural' from the exclusive and totalizing domain of patriarchal and heterosexual authority" (Doan in Morrison, Who Cares 174), *The Stone Gods* utterly shakes normal and natural binaries. What emerges as queer within Winterson's depiction is that which does not conform to the queerness of queerly normative dominant sexual practices.

If queer is taken as not automatically reflecting anything, as that which is truly oppositional and transgressive, "aquire[ing] its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (Halperin 62) in a given context, the narrative voice of Billie Crusoe provides the texts' queer touchstone. The details of her previous life are only hinted at but what we are told renders her unusual amongst the Central Power's population. We know she has had her data-chipped reprocessed, after being tried "for acts of Terrorism against the State that included aiding, abetting and hiding unknowns" (Winterson 54) and is being banished to outer space, as the Central Power doesn't forget or forgive opposition (Winterson 54). She works for Enhancement, an agency that "explain[s] to people that they really do want to live their lives in a way that is good for them and for the Community. Enforcement steps in when it doesn't quite work out," (Winterson 11) and dislikes it immensely. From the first page she stands out as critical of the system, seeing it as "repressive, corrosive, and antidemocratic" (Winterson 54). She is very much alone. She gets depressed - which is basically illegal (Winterson 27) - and whilst everyone else aspires towards career development, sexual gratification through latest technologies and migration to the new Planet Blue, she revels in sifting through the past. In this sense, what is queer about Billie is a form of conservatism, a longing for previous times and spaces, and the illusive desire to recreate them. Billie lives on a farm; "the last of its line - like an ancient ancestor everyone forgot. It's a bio-dome world, secret and sealed: a message in a bottle from another time" (Winterson 13). "In a world that clones its meat in the lab and

engineers its crops underground [and] thinks natural food is dirty and diseased" (Winterson 9).

As a queer narrator Billie occupies a not quite placeable position within the socio-sexual landscape, most notably in her negotiation of biotechnologies. She is vocally sceptical yet (professionally) propagates their use; she is horrified at the divorce of sex from emotions, yet falls in love with a robot; she is seemingly not Fixed (Winterson 45) yet upon encountering a woman who has aged naturally, is repulsed and horrified. "I had never seen a living person look like this. I had seen archive footage of how we used to age . . . but in front of me, now, was a thing with skin like a lizard's, like a stand-up handbag" (Winterson 45). Whilst she queerly disrupts the text she remains unplaceable, thereby making any a queer reading of *The Stone Gods* slippery.[5] Consider one of the few examples where identity is articulated along sexual lines; Billie unwillingly attends a sex club called *The Peccadillo,* and is approached by a woman with smiling mouths implanted onto her breasts for sex. When she refuses, the woman asks

"'You're not straight, are you?'
'Not exactly.'
'Well, then, come along' (Winterson 24)."

Here queer-by-default facilitates an almost disapproving, disbelieving response, and the 'not exactly' reveals Winterson's continued authorial stance as one of abrasion of the power of identity labels. The mouth/breast woman's response "well, then, come along" is almost satirical in this alignment of same-sex desire with casual, meaningless sex. Billie then reflects;

"Am I a prude? Am I a moralist? Am I letting life's riches pass me by? Why do I want to go for a walk in the woods and say nothing until you turn to me and I take your face in both hands and I kiss you? I don't even know who you are (Winterson 24)."

As a narrator she thus provides an alternative perspective on Winterson's queer-by-default social world,[6] one which at once takes up the challenge of representing the numerous possibilities contained within lesbian existence[7] and simultaneously strips queerness of any historical dependency upon same-sex enactments. More crucially she functions to bring the a/moral framework of the Central Power's sexual landscape into focus; in one way working to link contemporary readers with the socio-sexual landscapes therein, in another way standing alone as a queer character queerying the norms of her own temporal frame. Billie's character may be read as queer (for her sexual identity) yet is also queerly placed in Winterson's imagined landscape; she provides

a singular voice whose desires and fantasies contrast with her contemporaries, whose dually-queer-positioning provides a queer narrative continuum throughout the disparate textual fragments.

Billie's narrative voice provides a link between contemporary social scripts and Winterson's dystopian world where anything goes. The interesting aspect of this linkage, however, is not the narrators 'normality', or urge 'for normality' (whatever that can mean in a norm-less society), but her ethics. These ethics begin from a desire for the past-conservatism perhaps, though it is unclear whether her longings for bygone days are based on experience or on subversive rummages through the 'central archive.' Perhaps her ethics could be read as positively queer ones, though the sheer plausibility of this other world casts the debate with an uneasy urgency. This is most starkly illuminated in the issue of paedophilia; we are told that in the Central Power it is now rife, explained as an outcome of the sexual boredom which defines the society. "Now that everyone is young and beautiful, a lot of men are chasing girls who are just kids. They want something different when everything has become the same" (Winterson 21). During the same visit to *The Pecadillo* the narrator confronts a bouncer about it; he justifies it through a human rights frame;

'"It's like every other Civil Rights and Equal Rights battle, OK? You had Blacks at one time. You had Semites at one time. You had mixed marriages, you had gays. All legal. No problem. We're just victims of prejudice and out-of-date laws.'
'It's called 'paedophilia.'
'That's just a word, like "homosexual.'
'No, its not a word like 'homosexual,' it's a word like 'goat-fucker.'
'What's a goat?'
'Let me try again. 'The kids are too young' (Winterson 25)."

Whilst no conclusive textual closure follows this conversations, the moral and ethical questions that it articulates remain vivid and recurring throughout the whole text. The central distinctions drawn in the exchange (between homosexuality, bestiality and paedophilia) point towards the textually unresolved crux of sexual ethics in (a fictional) queer space; it asks readers to place the lines themselves, or in other words, if anything goes, where do ethics and human relationalities go?

Male gaze

The organising force that structures sexual desires within *The Stone Gods* emerges as invariably male. Dehinged from heteronormativity as metastructure, the desirous male gaze persists as the root thrust shaping the socio-sexual landscape,

trickling down through all levels of Winterson's imagined society. This works on the most basic level by defining notions of female beauty and body size ('model thin' or 'model thinner'), age and aesthetic. Genetic Fixing (at a given age) is normal. Physical ageing is considered "information failure" (Winterson 10) and "fixing is simple. Unfixing to age naturally is pretty simple, though it is only ever done for medical research" (Winterson 20). It is so widespread that when Billie meets an unfixed woman, she is disgusted and also confused;

"there was a woman in front of me, fumbling with her mask, coughing. I went to help her, and she grabbed my hand, 'Getting old,' she said, and I wondered if I had misheard because we don't use those words any more. We don't need to use them: they are irrelevant to our experience (Winterson 44)."

The majority of men 'Fix' younger than fifty, "there are no women who Fix past thirty" (Winterson 10). Though the availability of genetic Fixing is hailed as democratic within the Central Power (it is banned in the Eastern Caliphate and the Sino-Moscow pact has limited it just to the uber-wealthy) its usage unfolds along distinctly gendered lines, lines which find their form, substance and maintenance in meeting the (not necessarily heterosexual) invariably male gaze. The obsession with female youth is literally writ all over female bodies, containing uneasy parallels with off-page trends in cosmetic surgery. Billie explains;

"science can't fix everything, though - women feel they have to look youthful, men less so, and the lifestyle programmes are full of the appeal of the older man. Everybody wants one - young girls and gay toyboys adore Manfred. His boyfriend has designed a robot that looks like him. Myself, I wouldn't be able to tell the difference (Winterson 11)."

The heavy sarcasm of the narrative tone may reveal her critical stance, yet she is not immune from the systematic Fixing of gender/ed aesthetics; when her male boss tells her to get a new dress, she complies. Simultaneously inside and outside of the system, Billie is able to be that which she mocks - at least on the aesthetic level - and also maintain a concerned position.

Adult heterosexual marriage has been disrobed of any binding power and sexual attractiveness, articulated along very distinctly set lines, forms the basis of sexual interactions. Significantly, romantic relations between adults rarely feature in the text; when they are mentioned in meaningful form, it is their absence that is mourned. Though the quote above hints at a female urge to move beyond sexy skin for relationships, this urge remains unfulfilled

between humans within the central narrative. The text is so full of sexual acts and orientations that the absence of real relationships is easy to miss. Fidelity does not feature in the text; the one case of marriage offered is sharply defined by the overarching principle of the desirous male gaze. In this example we meet a married woman, named simply as Pink, who dresses all in pink and lives surrounded by celebrity holograms. It is Billie's task to meet her and discuss her aim to be "genetically reversed to twelve years old to stop her husband running after schoolgirls" (Winterson 14-15). The minimum age for Fixing is getting younger and younger (Winterson 25); Billie is heavily sceptical as it transpires that Pink's aim is simply to keep her husband coming home, she explains "we don't have sex any more. He says I'm too old" (20).

This case of the genetically recoding of desire/ability is justified by the characters as fulfilling not male, but female, desires. "So this is the future: girls fixed at eight years old, maybe ten, hopefully twelve. Or will they want women's minds in girls' bodies and go for genetic reversal?" (Winterson 26) This discursive dis-remembering of the force of male centric orderings of desire centrally pervades *The Stone Gods* ; under the banner of sexual liberation for all, female bodies are further disjointed from their minds, their desires and their individual potentialities. Winterson's depiction of this trajectory (Billie herself has found proof that things weren't always this way) parallels contemporary feminist critiques of what McRobbie terms the "aftermath of feminism." She writes

"there is a kind of exchange, and also a process of displacement and substitution going on here. The young woman is offered a notional form of equality, concretised in education and employment, and through participation in consumer culture and civil society, in place of what a reinvented feminist politics might have to offer (2)."

When Billie tracks down Pink's wife at a sex club, Mr McMurphy's response is blase. He supports the Fixing and dismisses Billie's questions dismissively, "yeah, whatever she wants, I'm behind her all the way. Her choice. I believe that women should make their own choices. Whatever she wants, all the way" (Winterson 26). Mr McMurphy's response is eerily reminiscent of our own allegedly post-feminist culture, one which

"works in part to incorporate, assume and naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially, it also works to commodity feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer . . . post-feminism is white and middle class by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self (Tasker and Negra 2)."

The holistic text reads as a confirmation of our current social climate where female autonomy is confirmed through the propagation of a 'new sexual contract' which defines women as fully autonomous in their sexual and aesthetic choices, whilst the options available remain limited through male-centric desirous lines (McRobbie 8). Here Winterson's engagement with the debate may be read as an urgent warning for women everywhere; the technological advances that have become normalised within the social setting of *The Stone Gods* are not so very incredulously distant from contemporary off-page settings (Gorton 98). Discussing the way that biological age is negotiated within contemporary films and television programmes, for example, Wearing talks of how mainstream media is routinely "girling" adult women, locating a "connection between "rejuvenation' and highly conventional forms of femininity and sexuality that set the standards of both chronological decorum and time defiance regulating other contemporary bodies.' (Wearing 305).
Returning to age within *The Stone Gods* (where biologically, it has been paused), the utter elevation of female youthfulness as 'the ideal' femininity stretches Billie's precarious positioning to the limits. As she muses on the advent of widespread paedophilia, she claims that

"[the future of] women is uncertain. We don't breed in the womb any more, and if we weren't wanted for sex . . . but there will always be men. Women haven't gone for little boys. Women have a different approach. Surrounded by hunks, they look for 'the ugly man inside' (Winterson 26)."

A timely warning indeed. Overall, the insistence of the male gaze as an organising factor within social, sexual, aesthetic and consumer landscapes has remained constant, regardless of queer political gains, both within the text and in contemporary culture. Reflecting upon how this came about, McRobbie suggests that the political potential of global feminism(s) is simply too vast for "the current global and still patriarchal system of economic power and domination" (2). *The Stone Gods* reiterates this theme; not only is female autonomy and community held hostage here, but all the figures of power (within the initial section of the text, at least) are men.

Sexy (white) citizens

Winterson's depiction of queerness in *The Stone Gods* contains a critique of current biopolitical practices in the global north. Whilst the male gaze emerges as ordering socio-sexual desires in the Central Power, this first epoch of *The Stone Gods* reveals its elevation in accord with the pre-eminence of biopolitical technologies of the self and geopolitical agendas of disciplining the selves. Arondekar suggests that in much of queer theory/studies the

"materialities of colonialism and empire [oft] emerge as mere referents, rather than as terrains of thick description" (16). Whilst *The Stone Gods* does partially deal with the materialities of empire, it does so by focusing exclusively upon those within the Central Power, and the dissenters within what may be seen as colonial territory. We are shown here an all encompassing corporate-sponsored state dictatorship of technology, self-appointed as giver and taker of life (Winterson 18), regulating each detail of the lives of citizens and maintaining a distinction between real citizens and all other "unknowns" (Winterson 31). The mircomanagement of sexuality is integral to the whole system and the sexualised moving of bodies forms the underside to the fragile appearance of harmony in the Central Power.

Gendered and sexualised aspects of citizenship are increasingly discussed as linking sexual, economic and racial normativities with nationhood and the reproduction of national bodies (see Puar, Kuntsman, Haritaworn and Lambevski, for examples). It has been argued that "the abstract figure of the citizen has to have a specific character so as to be deserving of rights," rights through which heterosexuality is embedded and 'naturally' propagating social institutions of marriage and the family" (Narrain 62-64). In Winterson's Central Power the route to citizenship is disrobed of heteronormativising prowess and children are perversely displaced to laboratories beyond human form. Yet within this imagined citizenry other norms emerge; norms closely regulated by biopolical projects which resonate with contemporary social scripts. As Haritaworn has argued, "sexual freedom now signifies the exceptional status of American and, arguably, European societies, which are able to imagine themselves as morally superior in their support of female, same-sex and other alternative sexualities" (Haritaworn 9). The propagation of this "new sexual contract which claims that sexual liberation has been achieved" (Haritaworn 10) crucially depends upon paradigmatic fantasies of othered sexualities; most notably, in the current political climate, concerning Muslims, and Winterson's overall approach to Islam and Muslims is markedly ambiguous. As Haritaworn continues, the body of "the 'terrorist' has partly replaced the white gay person as significant sexual Other ... racism and imperialism are thus enabling factors for gay citizenship" (Haritaworn 9).

The racism and imperialism noted above is manifest in the extreme within the texts' positioning of sexualised bodies beyond, and concurrently within, its own borders. The Eastern Caliphate serves as the source for under-age "mail ordered" wives, who are then genetically fixed to remain nine years old (Winterson 25). More explicitly, the children featured at *The Pecadillo* are from the Caliphate. As a proud club bouncer explains to a disgusted Billie,

"We buy them. We wouldn't do it to kids born in the Central Power because (a) it's illegal and (b) we're civilized" (Winterson 23). In this sense the ways that all desiring bodies are tied into, and constantly reaffirmed as what Haritaworn terms "loyal repetitions of the nation" or here, the Central Power, speaks directly to relationships between queer citizenship and other/ed nation states. The emergence of queer bodies as normative is facilitated, in Winterson's imagination, by intricate biopolitical technologies and corporate micromanagement of citizens lives and erotic bodies, in order to distract the population from the state's international (and intergalactical) agendas. In this vein Puar insists that "instead of retaining queerness exclusively as dissenting, resistant, and alternative," it is necessary to "underscore contingency and complicity [of queerness] with dominant formations" (121-2). The sexualised bodies of citizens in Winterson's Central Power not only personify the extent to which queerness can plausibly develop as complicit with such formations, they signify, in their sheer abundance, the ability of queerness to be stabilised as normalising (Duggan 50).

Returning to *The Stone Gods,* it is necessary to ask, then, how race factors into the whole narrative and is writ upon these bodies so complicit with otherising, and sexualising, others. It is not so difficult to read the Central Power as loosely based on contemporary America; it is impossible, however, to read the text without noticing the absence of race. Whilst Winterson's efforts to engage critically with contemporary biopolitical projects and Islamophobia (and indeed, develop them to horrifically plausible ends) are significant, it must be noted that her textual imaginings are far from addressing racial differences within this dystopia. As Morrison reminds us "the world does not become raceless or will not become unracialiazed by assertion. The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act" (*Playing in the dark* 46). When Winterson's characters are described, race isn't mentioned at all; significantly the 'ideal woman', as compliant robo sapien, is Caucasian. Whiteness emerges here as the default identity, containing "the privilege of being unmarked and simply understood as the norm" (Schueller 71). Considering the urgency with which the text appears to resist so many forms of disciplining and normalising moves, Winterson's silence on skin colour is highly problematic. This silence, however, is filled up by queer flirtations with sexual/ised cyborgs and the posing of philosophical questions about the meaning of human-robot difference, identity, relationalities and even erotic potentionalities. Here, as Wilkerson bluntly says, it is questionable "whether many white feminists have enthusiastically taken up the cyborg myth precisely because of what it does not say about race" (Wilkerson in Schueller 81).

Temporalities and no futures (a thousand years ago)

As a whole *The Stone Gods* appears to play with the concepts of space and time, and in doing so, challenge readers' approaches to making sense of them. Halberstam's discussion of "queer time" resonates here; she uses the term to refer to

"those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance. 'Queer space' refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enables by the production of queer counterpublics (In a queer time 6)."

Within the text the idea of space is clearly delineated (the Central Power has tangible boundaries and frontiers bordering 'other,' non visitable spaces) and also, is expanding as humans approach new planets as potential habitats. Simultaneously, Winterson has created a fictional juxtaposition of diverse temporalities, where queer time may be dehinged from a queer politic (and is utterly unrelated to homo(sex) but where mass understandings of temporality are themselves rather queer. The holistic text can be read as a queer intervention into normativising conceptions of history,[8] as a break with linear distinctions between here, there, then, and more, between what was, what is and what may be. If "queer temporality disrupts the normative narratives of time that form the base of nearly every definition of the human in almost all of our modes of understanding" (Halberstam, *In a queer time* 152). Winterson effectively queers temporality, and in doing so, reveals just how unnatural supposedly natural ideas of time may be (Harvey 228-229). The significance of this unravels most clearly in the moments of displacement readers may encounter in trying to place the narrative fragments (in relation to each other and to now).[9] Such a displacement, or even the displacing affect of the text, is mirrored further throughout the temporalities that the text trussles through; it is within the endless looping, re-looping, turning and re-turning forth, backward, and in the most literal of senses, through time that the text finds its own time, and locates itself beyond any linear time-frame. Winterson's own approach to time and temporality itself flits through the pages, acknowledging

"two contradictory certainties: that our outward lives are governed by the seasons and the clock; that our inward lives are governed by something much less regular - an imaginative impulse cutting through the dictates of daily time, and leaving us free to ignore the boundaries of here and now and pass like lightning along the coil of pure time, that is, the circle of the universe and whatever it does or does not contain (Winterson in Moore 99)."

The power of *The Stone Gods* lies in its effective dismantling of this first "certainty." The seasons have lost much of their regulatory function (as humans have destroyed the ozone layer and created artificial skies) they are "running out of planet and ... have found a new one" (Winterson 4) and biological age no longer signifies anything. As Billie summarises, 'we made ourselves rich polluting the rest of the world, and now the rest of the world is polluting us" (37). The 'imaginative impulse' that Winterson cites here as characterising the inner is writ large on the outer within *The Stone Gods* ; it is embodied, performed upon the body and collective bodies of time are squewed. If we can "understand and practice time as fully incorporated, as nowhere existing outside of bodies and their *pleasures"* (Casarino in Freeman 58), *The Stone Gods* locates the desiring body at the pinnacle of temporal frames, as the central organising principle of experiencing temporality and more, as the vehicle through which linear narratives of time are disrupted, disputed and thrown into disarray. As a queering of time, the text queers by "appropriate[ing] the most intractable foundations of normativity and transgressively infus[ing] them with innovative queer meanings" (Soto 17); the meanings Winterson offers are clustered around desires.

The only sense of regularity within the temporality here is an utter lack of regularity. The dual-driving forces behind this disregularity are technology and desirous repetition; the potential to actually stop time in the most fundamental of ways is predicated upon technological advances, and these are employed according to specific ontologies of desire. The Genetic Fixing which now marks every citizen of the Central Power as equally, democratically "young and beautiful" (Winterson 19) and stops the ageing process; the robots which incite desire and 'naturally' never age, function along gendered and sexualised lines. In other words, the Central Powers' social scripts of desire fuel this dis-regulated temporal landscape; on the global scale, their singular impulse to change the way that temporality is experienced has altered it for every human. Due to irresponsible over-development and poorly managed natural resources, the Central Power has reduced the earth's life span to a meagre fifty more years; effectively, time itself has run out for humans on earth. Whilst citizens of the Central Power exist within a peculiarly queer temporal bubble (where time itself fails to contain any meaning), the earth's biological real time, in a landscape of utter unreality, is over.

In this fantastical imaginary death is ominously undermentioned, as time is effectively paused. Birth is rewrit as hidden, as sequenced away, as buried within and behind laboratory settings with the fruit of human reproduction reproduced outside of the human; everyone is born in laboratories, and thus, instead of birth, and the celebration of

birth as the ultimate continuation of human existence, we are shown a society where "birthdays don't matter because they mark the passing of the years, and for us years don't pass in the way they once did. G is the day and year you genetically fix. It's a great day to celebrate" (Winterson 18). G days epitomise the social overpowering of natural temporalities. Tan Hoang reminds us that queer cultures "create our own temporal normativity outside the heteronormative family" and Winterson's imagined genetic Fixing takes this statement to its limits; it also exemplifies the interplay of desire and modes of conceptualising time (Tan Hoang 185). In this, contrary to much of religious eschatological narratives (where the sensation and perception of time itself speeds up, as human time and temporality literally folds in upon itself), *The Stone Gods* pauses time to such an extent that its desirousness loses all meaning. We are shown what may be seen as the shadow of time-loss; it is not the manifestation of queer, creative and/or political time-bending, it is simply an abrasion without meaning. The inability to accept time, in its ruthless, relentless unfolding, replaced by a blanket willed ignorance of the effects of biological temporalities.

If Winterson's previous work offers what Moore terms "anti-origin" stories, where there is "no originary unity from which postmodern subjects in history fall away, or decay" (121), *The Stone Gods* evokes an ever-present call to make-your-own origin stories, to decide your 'birth,' to rewrite it at will, to defy decay and more, with the texts' holistic morphing of beginnings and endings and all the points in between, Winterson offers an endless array of origins. How to make sense of the temporality of the text? Chose your own beginning, yet be warned, and be aware, that irregularity and infinite repetition are the only constants. Human brains in the Central Power are shrinking, are literally devolving as they are used less, and the capacities of robo sapiens are evolving (Winterson 39). If Winterson can be read as offering a "Foucauldian treatment of the novel as an archaeology of the body, a study of its changing historical production" (Morrison, Who Cares 175) the temporal embodiment within *The Stone Gods* emerges as a stopping of time, as a rewind, perhaps, of biological temporalities, only to see them replaced by technological creations which literally invert evolution and human history.

Against this backdrop of time-esquewed by desires the shrinking of the human brain is intriguing. As a potential future prospect it sketches out a complete capturisation of queerly embodied antisocial turns on a massive human scale. It offers, whilst also functioning as a queer intervention into time and space, an as yet unknownable political space. Edelman argues that

"the fantasy subtending the image of the Child invariably shapes the

logic within which the political itself must be thought. [The terms of] . . . reproductive futurism impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organising principle of communal relations (No Future 2)."

Winterson depicts an utter refusal of both heteronormativity and biological reproductive futurism. She has changed the very terms of thinking through the political, and yet the queerness of the population's bodies does nothing to re-shape (or re-infuse with hope, even) the political sphere. *The Stone Gods* could be read as a continuation of Edelman's argument, though for very different aims and without the explicit backdrop of homophobia. The society construed therein is fundamentally antisocial, the death drive manifested to new extremities in the destruction of the planet, and all biological processes (including reproduction, both symbolic and physical) are utterly detached from sex. If a queer politic is to be found at all within the text, it is one closer to what Edelman elevates as a "queer oppositionality," one which refuses the seductive hope of any future, one which would

"oppose itself to the structural determinants of politics as such, which is also to say, that would oppose itself to the logic of opposition . . . [such] a refusal . . . of every substantialization of identity, which is always oppositionally defined, and, by extension, of history as linear narrative . . . in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself - as itself - through time (Edelman, No Future 4)."

In pursuing such a reading, however, it is necessary to note that Winterson's own position is far from confirmed. She eschews any continuous commitment to identitarian politics on the basis of sexual identity - and even, at times, appears to offhandedly dismiss the relevance of (homo)sexual identities in her depictions of characters - her work also offers a powerfully evocative post-identitarian political landscape, one where sexual identities lose any incitement to discourse as they simply are. This is tempting, of course, but functions alongside a much deeper theme, I would suggest, and one that provides a constant link throughout her disparate works; for whatever and however her characters identify, do and desire, they remain resolutely human.

Edelman discusses a quote from Wildmon that equates the power of queerness to "society's destruction" and adorns it with the power to end the whole human race (Edelman, No future 23). Such an equation is hardly novel; for over three thousand years at least [10] societal acceptance of same-sex enactment has coexisted uneasily with the potential for human reproduction to end. Since

Sodom, then, human finitude has haunted homosexual acts and the equation of societal acceptance of these acts - and indeed of all non-reproductive sexual acts - with symbolic endings remain within religious-framed homophobic rhetoric. In religious eschatological narratives queerness is often positioned as signifying the proximity of the end. In other words, we may be queer in this lifetime, yet our very queerness, and the advent of (albeit limited and localised) sites of social tolerance, are signs in and of themselves, that the end of the world is soon to come. (We thus find the marking of queer bodies as holding within their own sexual skins the proving of deeply gendered and sexualised eschatological narratives).[11] Griffney distinguishes between queer eschatology and queer apocalypticism;

"both deal with the event as it relates to temporality, the former looks constantly towards the future in order to prepare for the arrival (of queer) and the end (of heteronormativity) . . . a book such as Edelman's situates itself within the immediacy of that endpoint as it unfolds here (Queer Apocal(o)ptic/ism 61)."

Perhaps *The Stone Gods* deserves to be read as both; it is eschatological (though not in any overtly positive or negative sense) and is firmly situated within contemporary scapes. It is also apocalyptic, in many ways, and succeeds in merging interrogations of temporalities, identitarian politics, biopolitics, biotechnologies, imperialism/s, surveillance culture, gender/ed discourses, and (sexual) rights culture with very real environmental concerns. Whilst Winterson's silence on skin colour is problematic (and arguably filled in by reliance on biotechnology and cyborg trope), the text contains multiple warnings about contemporary social scripts, and reminds us that queer sexual acts do not 'naturally' result in acts of queering.

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[1] Throughout this discussion I use the term queer in its broadest sense, as "question[ing] the supposedly stable relationship between sex, gender, sexual desire and sexual practice" (Brown, Browne and Lim 8) and simultaneously signifying "the messiness of identity, the fact that desire and thus desiring subjects cannot be placed into discrete identity categories" (Giffney, Introduction 2-3).

[2] The text itself is loosely divided into three interconnected sections, covering different epochs of imagined dystopias. For the

purpose of this paper I focus on the first section, which begins in the Central Power.

[3] I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of Interalia for underlining this point.

[4] Huffer talks of the antisocial turn as containing a "refusal to critique the psyche ... queer subjectivity performatively turns morality inside out by embracing and sublimating the psyche's 'death drive' as shame. In its embrace of figures of shame-driven finitude ... antisocial performativity would appear to do away with the subject altogether. But what it takes away with one hand it gives back with the other, as it continues to assume the existence of a psyche as container of the subject's death" (115). See also Bersani, 2009; Edelman, 1998 and 2004 and Halberstam 2005 and 2008.

[5] The unknowable possibility that the narrator is herself Fixed yet protesting the compulsion to relates to multiple current questions; Thomas asks, for example, "to what extent could an otherwise 'straight' subject elaborate a queer criticism?" (11).

[6] Whilst the three narrative voices that structure the text (which are arguably readable as one character reincarnated, rewritten or re-morphed across three temporal planes) are orientated towards characters of the same-sex, they are not identified as such and the need for identity on the basis of sexual object choice is seemingly textually bypassed.

[7] Perhaps this way of being politically lesbian corresponds to Jagose's wonderings at "how queer scholarship might best imagine modes of being lesbian that refuse the consequential promise of 'history" (186).

[8] Paradoxically, any attempts to locate queer moments retrospectively are thwarted; "if "queer" exists at all, it can only be in the mode of an ongoing performativity: in a present created and sustained by the effortful acts - productions and interventions - that embody it" (Barber and Clark 2).

[9] I am reminded here of Ahmed's description of the queer moment as one "in which objects appear slantwise and the vertical and horizontal axes appear 'out of line' ... thing seem 'straight' (on the vertical axis), when they are 'in line,' which means when they are aligned with other lines" (66).

[10] There is broad scholarly consensus that the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative (shared by the Abrahamic faiths) relates to historical events of 2300 years ago.

[11] Tibetan Buddhism cites the rise of sexual misconduct - including but not limited to same-sex unions and oral sex - as proof that the 21st century exists within a period of darkness, one that foreshadows the cyclical destruction of all that is. Not dissimilarly, dominant interpretations of Islamic eschatological narratives maintain that same-sex acts, their social acceptance and the rise of gender bending, are portents that we are living within the last days. There are parallel narratives embedded within Christian and Jewish eschatologies, and in no religious metanarrative reads queerness as a positive sign of temporality. These religious renderings of queer sex (as heralding a wider antisocial turn) are relevant because they prefigure, to a certainly chronological extent at least, the arguments and discursive formulations that have arisen recently within queer theories. They are, in and of themselves, formative of Winterson's work.

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